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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S MFA AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS CONDEMN
AL-ASKARIYA SHRINE BOMBING

REF: STATE 28802

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

11. (U) Per reftel, PAO and Pol/Econ Chief separately shared texts of statements by President Bush and Ambassador Khalilzad regarding the destruction of the Al-Askariya shrine with Azerbaijani MFA Spokesperson and Americas Desk on February 23. MFA Spokesperson Tahir Tagizade subsequently issued a statement on the incident to two Azerbaijani newspapers on February 24. An unofficial embassy translation of the statement follows:

The Government of Azerbaijan strongly condemns the attack on the Al-Askariya shrine and all forms of terror. As a country with a tradition in which Shi'a and Sunni Muslims live together, we call on the international community to support the democratic development of a unified Iraq. As a coalition partner working to ensure the peace and stability of Iraq, we oppose actions that destabilize Iraq and condemn efforts to create divisions among the Iraqi people. We call on all Iraqis to be calm and patient.

12. (U) Separately, the Caucasus Muslim Board on February 23 issued a statement condemning the attack on the shrine. "Only Islam's enemies, who try to aggravate the conflict between different sects in Islam, could be happy with this act. This crime does not have any relation to religion and is political in nature." In the statement, the Board also worried that the attack on the shrine may have serious consequences and lead to more serious tragedies. The Board called on Muslims "not to be instruments at the hands of Islam's enemies, and not to allow ethnic separatism, but rather jointly withstand these challenges."

13. (U) Azerbaijani religious activist and leader of the unofficial Juma Mosque Ilgar Ibrahimoglu also issued a statement February 23 condemning the attack on the Al-Askariya shrine. Characterizing the attack as "an act of barbarism and vandalism," Ibrahimoglu said the crime had shocked all believers. He offered condolences on behalf of the Juma Mosque community and said "believers pray that Allah will grant peace to Iraqi land, strengthen the national government of Iraq, withdraw foreign troops from the country as soon as possible and strictly punish those who stir up hostility between religions."

14. (SBU) Comment: The destruction of one of the Shi'a community's most revered sites has had surprisingly little resonance in this largely secular Shi'a nation. News coverage over the last few days has focused instead on the

February 21-22 visit of Russian President Putin and the
February 23 collapse of a market roof in Moscow that killed a
number of Azerbaijanis. End comment.

HARNISH